

INDIAN SKEPTIC

No. 01/02

February 2010

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- Humanist Campaign Against Religious Exploitation of a Child
 - Reincarnation & Past-Life Regression Therapy: A Rationalist Critique
 - Shiv Sena Ire against Shah Rukh Khan

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editor & publisher

manoj

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*It shall be the duty
of every citizen of
India -*

*to develop the
scientific temper,
humanism and the
spirit of inquiry and
reform*

*(Article 51A (h) Part IVA -
Fundamental Duties,
Constitution of India)*

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The Appeal of Rationalism

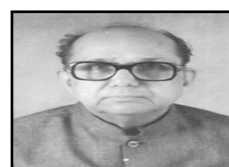
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From the President of FIRA

Narendra Nayak

I am very happy that Manoj has finally converted the *Bangalore Skeptic* into the *Indian Skeptic* and shall be bringing it out every month. Premanand's baby was to be continued by all of us and I do hope that all of you shall be also sending your contributions to Manoj on a regular basis like you have been doing with Premanand. It has been a long felt need to have our own organ for the movement and the role played by the *Indian Skeptic* as its hard copy will be continued by this e journal. *Bangalore Skeptic* was originally started by Manoj to be an organ of the *Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha* to report on its activities. But, it gradually changed into an all related activity organ.

The last month has been very busy for the.

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FIRA. The last day of December started with the program at Ahmedabad at the National Children's Science Congress where we had the training program for the teachers attending the congress. We had two sessions for these teachers and they were well attended. The science city at Ahmedabad has been built very well and organised in a very planned manner. Some of the programs of the Children's Science Congress were held here and also a press meet to demonstrate the so called miracles. A very prominent program was to be the miracle exposure program by one Dr. Agarwal. Our friend Jacob went in search of that and did not find it any where! Finally we came to know that it was supposed be I doing that and Dr. Agarwal's name was wrongly inserted there! By the time we came to know that it was too late. That should give one an idea as to how disorganised the things were. Any way we made the best of the opportunity.

January 14th was the date on which, we rationalists were to be taught a lesson by a 'renowned' astrologer, one Bhaskar Shetty.

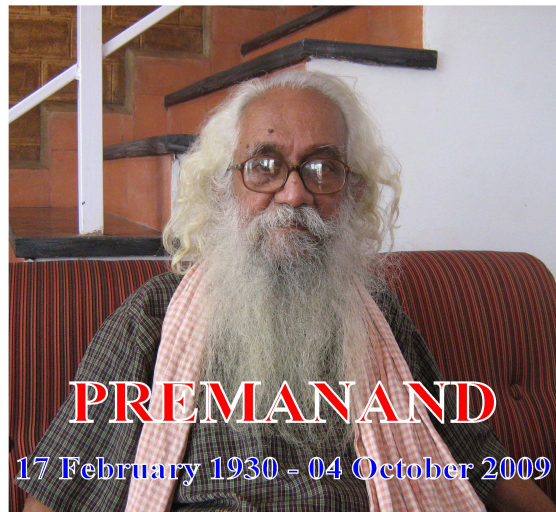
He had announced on the front page of a newspaper called *DNA*, Bangalore edition that he would take up our challenge on astrology. In a cleverly worded statement, he mentioned that he was not interested in the money offered but would take it up as his mission to 'teach us a lesson'. However, it is may guess that he had done that to avoid coughing up the deposit amount of Rs.5000. The lesson was to be at Bangalore on the 14th January. However, the challenger developed cold feet and postponed the date under the pretext that his sons marriage was to be on the 10th Feb and he was busy with that. The date has been now postponed to the 14th March and we do hope that all of us will be taught a much needed lesson on how 'scientific' astrology is! We are also having the meeting of the Karnataka State Federation of Rationalist Associations on that day and the executive committee meeting of FIRA too at *Akhila Karnataka Makkala Okkoota*, Chamrajapet, Bangalore.

On the 15th Jan was a very eagerly awaited event- the solar eclipse. In Karnataka the state govt. had declared an unofficial holiday for schools. But, in Mandya district it was not. Our solar eclipse celebration was to be at a Government Junior College at Pandavapura in this district. It was celebrated with a lecture to the students, followed by eating puffed rice under the eclipse to make the point that nothing would happen if we were to eat during the eclipse. We also watched the eclipse through various types of glasses made for eclipse viewing and the children had a good time. Siddaraju, the Chief Account Officer of the Mysore District Jilla Panchayath also attended. He is the founder of the Mandya Science Forum which had organised Premanand's Training camp about two decades back and also had instituted an award under his name long back. When these activities were going on, at a nearby village there was a display of superstitions in its worst form. A paraplegic child was being buried up to his neck in a pit under the impression that doing so during the solar eclipse would cure him.

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That got a lot of publicity in the media and on the next day the human rights commission and local health authorities visited the place. It turned out that the parents of this boy were desperate for a cure and it looked as if it was done to gain media publicity and sympathy.

From the 16th onwards it was time for a training program under the project called as H.N. Chaitanya Yatre. That was to remember Dr.H.Narasimhiah who is no more. He had constituted a committee for the scientific investigation of so called miracles in the 1970s under the aegis of the Bangalore University of which he was the vice Chancellor. It was fitting that a miracle exposure training program was to be conducted in his memory. This was held at a teachers training college and the training went on very well. On the first two days we had the presence of H.R.Swami and Srinivas Natekar who had been trained by Premanand nearly two decades back both of them have been actively carrying out this activity since then. We also had lectures by Prof. Nagaraj and Prof. Balachandra Rao about various topics related to scientific temper. There was also a star watching session and a fire walk. On

one of the days I had a lecture at the JSS University Medical College at Mysore on the topic- modus operandi of quacks. The talk was followed by a Q-A session and heated discussions on some of the topics raised.

The month end was the very important trip to Podanur to take a look at the things at Premanand's place. I have been intending to do that from quite some time but could not make it due to pressures of work. It was a sort of family reunion. Sushilakka had come down from Australia, Mayakka from Bangalore and Meerakka from Calicut. The books in Premanand's godown have to be properly catalogued and arrangements have to be made for the sale and republication. Since Sri G.D.Gopal the Chief of the G.D.Charities was in Germany, I handed over the copies of his will to Mrs.Gopal and informed her that I would come over when he returns from Germany. That would be some time in March. From Podanur I went to Tiruchirapally on my way to Periya Maniammai University. This is a deemed university and our program was at their engineering college campus. The morning's program was the martyr's program organised by the NSS, Ministry of Youth Affairs. In this program there were about three hundred participants from various colleges nearby. There were lectures about martyrdom, sacrificing one's life for a cause etc. During the interactions the names of martyrs were recalled. While the names of Bhagath Singh and M.K.Gandhi were to be expected, some of the youngsters added names of Savarkar, Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru to the list which was very surprising. The names of many of the members of the armed forces were also mentioned. U.Kumaresan the Vice President of FIRA spoke about secularism and I too about the same topic with the emphasis on why scientific temper and secularism are two faces of the same coin. In the afternoon session, a lecture demonstration on scientific temper was organised by the Rationalist Forum of the college for the students of the first year. There were about a thousand students.

There were very interesting interactions and it was surprising to note that there were so many superstitions even among the younger generation. Some of the youngsters wanted a training program and Dr.Veeramani the chancellor and the patron of Rationalist Forum was very happy with the program. He also suggested that the same may be conducted at the other campuses of the university to which we readily agreed. It is a pleasure to have programs at a place where the organisers have ideological synergy with our movement and go all the way with us.

In February, we have had programs at NITK, Suratkal and Periyar Science Museum at Chennai. It promises to be a busy month with programs at Mahad, Maharashtra where some activists from the Dalith movement from all over Maharashtra will be trained, The onwards to Mumbai and then to Itarsi in Madhya Pradesh where we propose to have programs at eight tribal villages in two days on the 20th and 21st February. Then on to Bhopal where we shall have the same for tribal schools. From 23rd to 27th Feb. we shall have a training camp for activists of the Social Development foundation at Indore. Well, those who are around the places mentioned are welcome to meet me and join us in these programs.

BS

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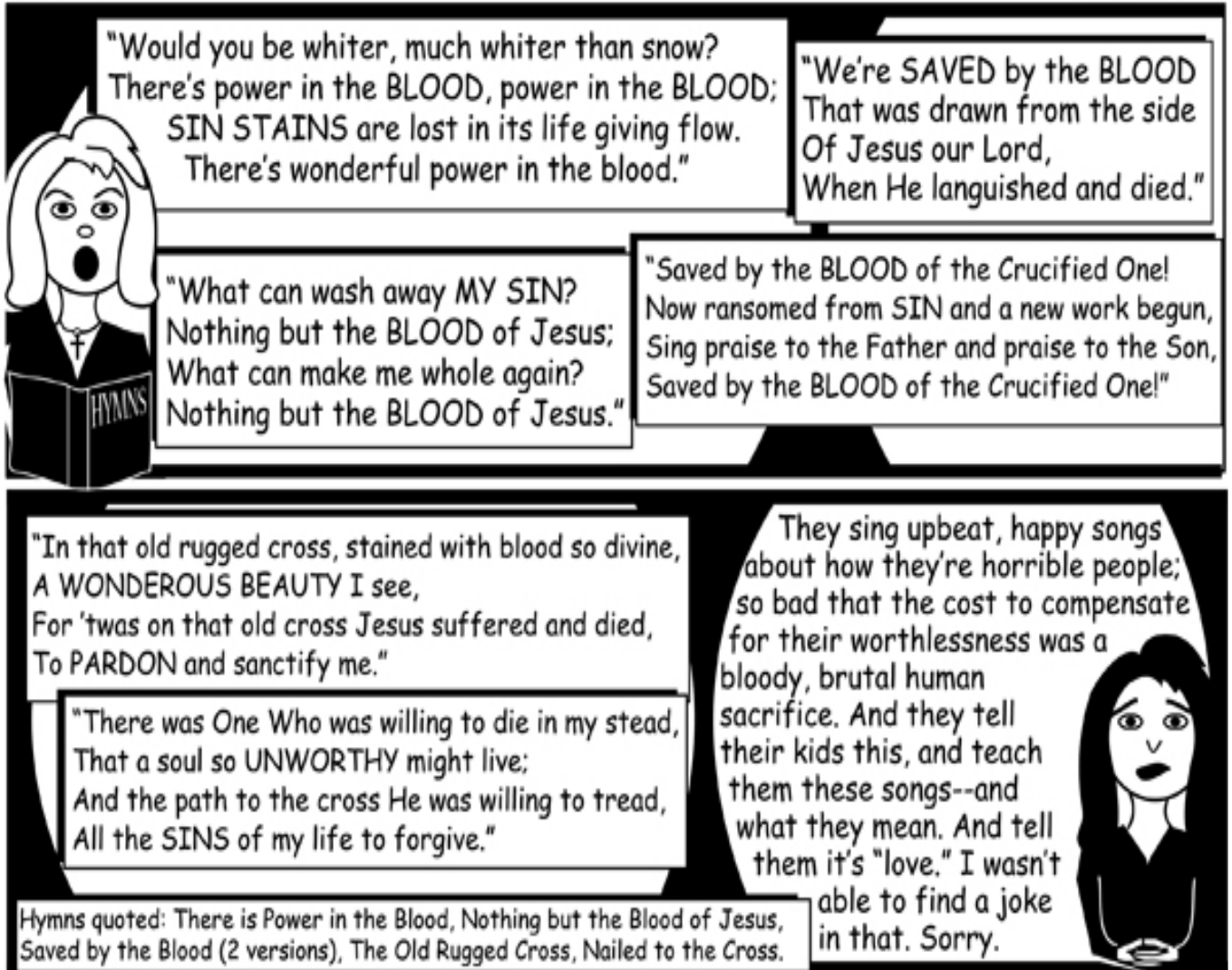
July 2009



***This is a regular column by Prof
Narendra Nayak, the President of the
Federation of Indian Rationalist
Associations***

ATHEIST EVE

TH DESIGN ©2010



"Would you be whiter, much whiter than snow?
There's power in the BLOOD, power in the BLOOD;
SIN STAINS are lost in its life giving flow.
There's wonderful power in the blood."

"We're SAVED by the BLOOD
That was drawn from the side
Of Jesus our Lord,
When He languished and died."

"What can wash away MY SIN?
Nothing but the BLOOD of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the BLOOD of Jesus."

"Saved by the BLOOD of the Crucified One!
Now ransomed from SIN and a new work begun,
Sing praise to the Father and praise to the Son,
Saved by the BLOOD of the Crucified One!"

"In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A WONDEROUS BEAUTY I see,
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
To PARDON and sanctify me."

"There was One Who was willing to die in my stead,
That a soul so UNWORTHY might live;
And the path to the cross He was willing to tread,
All the SINS of my life to forgive."

Hymns quoted: There is Power in the Blood, Nothing but the Blood of Jesus, Saved by the Blood (2 versions), The Old Rugged Cross, Nailed to the Cross.

They sing upbeat, happy songs about how they're horrible people; so bad that the cost to compensate for their worthlessness was a bloody, brutal human sacrifice. And they tell their kids this, and teach them these songs--and what they mean. And tell them it's "love." I wasn't able to find a joke in that. Sorry.



Tracie Harris is a graphic designer in Austin, Texas, US. According to the website, <http://www.atheist-community.org/>, "her long, slow recovery from a rabid fundamentalist upbringing led her to the creation of *Atheist Eve*".

Tracie Harris has been publishing *Atheist Eve* since 1 October 2004 and all her earlier works are archived at: <http://www.atheist-community.org/atheisteve/>. *Atheist Eve* is reproduced by *Indian Skeptic* with the author's permission.

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Shiv Sena Ire against Shah Rukh Khan

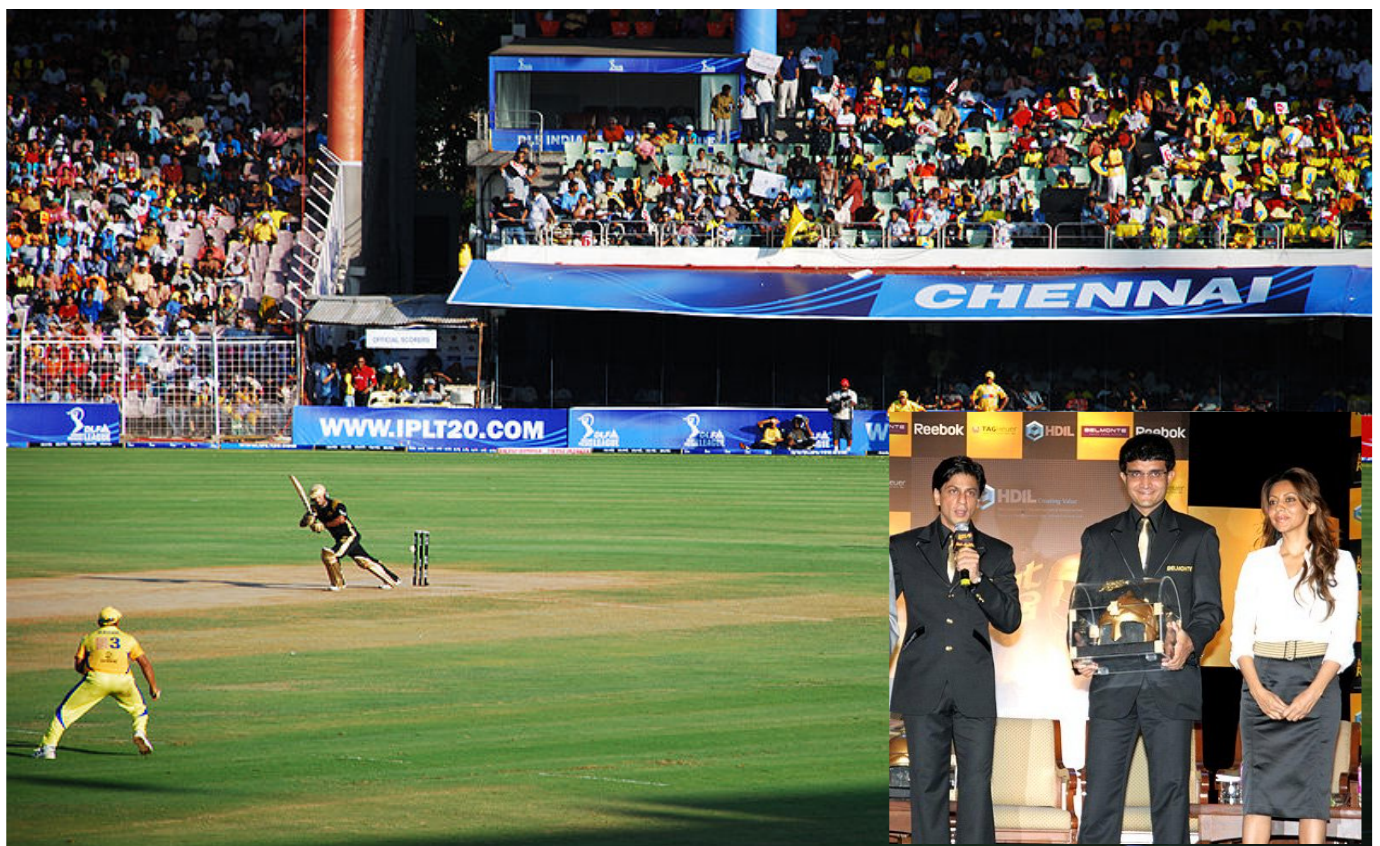
Ram Puniyani

A fortnight ago (January 2010) Shah Rukh Khan, the celebrated film star, voiced his opinion that Pakistani Cricket players should not be prevented from playing in IPL cricket League. This sparked a big row of protest from the local Shiv Sena supporters, who criticized Khan and tore the posters of his film, 'My Name is Khan', they also went on to say if Shah Rukh's 'Khan' is awakening he should very well go to Pakistan and be there. At the same time Shiv Sena is spearheading a violent campaign, 'Mumbai for Maharashtrians', to which even cricket star Sachin Tendulkar, a Maharashtrian, amongst others voiced their opinion that all parts of India belong to all the Indian citizens

Mumbai is currently seeing the turmoil around these twin issues, regionalism, and



communalism in its worst form. One knows that India-Pakistan relations have been quiet strained right since the beginning. There have been three wars between these two neighbors. The people living across the borders, with relatives on either side have been moaning with pain and anguish due to this strife between the



two countries. Many issues have been a bone of contention between the two neighbors, the major lately being terrorism.

Terrorism needs to be understood in its depth if it is to be eliminated. The roots of this terror lie in the politics of oil, creation of Madrassas on the soil of Pakistan to train the Al Qaeda terrorists by US. US wanted to confront the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the late 1970s. This Al Qaeda was created by indoctrinating the Muslim youth by instilling distorted

Pakistan, it is not the Pakistani state, or Pakistani people or democratic elements that are supporting this poisonous cancer. As such Pakistan lost her ex Prime Minister and regularly we see the acts of terror in Pakistan. To eliminate this cancer, the civilian Government in Pakistan is trying its own bit, but the Military-Mullah complex in Pakistan, patronized by US, is the one, which nurtures this phenomenon. While we are fully justified in condemning terrorism, calling upon civilian government to control it, it is also true that gestures of friendship



version of Islam. Osama bin Laden was brought in again by machinations of US, same Osama was given millions of dollars and tons of armaments to join the anti Russian forces.

After the defeat of Russian forces this indoctrinated outfit turned against others in the region. It did create havoc and continues to torment the region. It has been like a Frankenstein's monster, which has misused the identity of Islam for the acts of violence and currently Pakistan is the major victim of this monster.

While the terrorism's base might be in

to Pakistan will strengthen civilian government and eliminate terrorism in the long run. So peace with Pakistan has to be strengthened through music, sports, business and educational exchange. A Hate campaign between the neighbors will be harmful to the interests of both the countries.

So while anger against terrorism is natural, we can't ignore the deeper dynamics of the region and shun peace. Peace is the pre-requisite of progress of the region. The insinuations by Shiv Sena against Shah Rukh, asking him to go to Pakistan, just because his name is Muslim, is against the

values of Indian Constitution and the spirit of the National movement, which built the country. The divisive nature of regional politics is to be condemned through and through. Our concept of citizenship is not based around religion. People of all religions are equal citizens of the country. To doubt the patriotism of any citizen just because of 'one's religion' is the insult of Indian Constitution.

Same way, while appreciating the fact that the metros like Mumbai can't accommodate the population beyond a point, there is also a need to introspect as to why so many people migrate to Mumbai? As such, it is lop sided development of the country which forces people to migrate to such a metropolis. So while demanding a curb on Shiv Sena for its hooliganism and anti national utterances, one also has to focus attention for a pattern of development where people don't have to migrate just to survive. That's where the crux of the matter is.

Shiv Sena has a complex history. It was supported by industrialists and partly nurtured by a section of Congress leadership decades ago. The idea then was to smash the left trade unions, which were struggling for workers rights in an honest way. Later the same Shiv Sena attacked the South Indians, then Gujaratis and finally North Indians for sometime before jumping on the Rath (chariot) of Hinduvta spearhead by BJP's Lal Krishna Advani. Shiv Sena has been the most firm ally of BJP and its communal politics all through. Shiv Sena's supremo Bal Thackeray has also been indicted in the Srikrishna Commission report, a report which has been put into cold storage by the Congress government. Interestingly Shiv Sena, SS, presents its role in Mumbai violence as being that of protecting Hindus, a formulation which is from the World of make believe, which presents victim as the culprit, as Shrikrishna Commission makes it very clear.

The methods employed by Shiv Sena

earlier and MNS (Maharashtra Nav Nirman Sena) of Raj Thackeray show the parallels with the ones' employed by Hitler's foot soldiers, i.e. to intimidate people through street violence. In this direction on regular basis Shiv Sena in particular attacked artists, Gulam Ali, a Gazal singer from Pakistan, M.F. Hussain, a Painter, and now Shahrukh Khan. In these 'storm trooper' methods it SS had been associated with the parallel ones from RSS stream, Bajrang Dal etc. The idea is to vandalize and make a glaring attack on liberal values of democracy. While outfits like SS, MNS and Bajrang Dal are fascists, they use democratic space, the lapses of opportunist centralist politics to come up in the social space. Hitler also used the democratic space to come, to abolish the democratic space itself. The analogies of such formations with Hitler, fascists are too glaring to be ignored. They are a product politics of vested interests, taking advantage of centrist formations like Congress and then turning into Frankenstein's monsters.

With Bal Thackeray trying to pass on the mantle of his fascist politics, Uddhav and Raj, son and nephew respectively, claimed the inheritance. Bal Thackeray decided to anoint his son Uddhav as the heir apparent. Peeved by this the more aggressive Raj launched his own outfit, Maharashtra Nav Nirman Sena. In the formative period of MNS, Congress again played a complicit role by sitting pretty when Raj unleashed his aggression against hapless taxi drivers from North India and Bihar. This acted as the tonic for the MNS, and it became bold enough to unleash rampage time and over again. It has come to stay as a political force. The role of Congress has been very compromising as far as formation of Shiv Sena and MNS are concerned.

Shiv Sena- MNS primarily belong to divisive- fascist anti national ideology of communalism and regionalism. Their disregard for the values of Indian Constitution is there for all to see. Their politics also proves that divisive ideologies

strengthen each other. Both these outfits, particularly Shiv Sena has been using both these sectarianisms for its political benefit.

Shiv Sena and its offshoot, Maharashtra Nav Nirman Sena, both thrive on the divisive sentiments. The spirit of National integration is being attacked by the actions of these regional forces. We should not target our citizens in the name of religion or region. The encouragement of Hate against Pakistan is shortsighted and is playing to the crude emotions, ignoring the deeper causes of terrorism, for that the finger of accusation should point to the US policies which has been pursuing its politics

of control in the region and has used Pakistan as the base and ally for its ambitions of appropriating this Black Gold. One must support the rights of all our citizens within the limits of Indian Constitution and restrain the regional and communal forces for the sake of national progress.

BS

*Dr Ram Puniyani is a professor in
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Mumbai*

**Political Islam is not only reactionary on certain questions
(notably, the status of women) and is perhaps even responsible
for fanatical excesses directed against non-Muslim citizens
(such as the Copts in Egypt). It is fundamentally reactionary and
therefore obviously cannot participate in the progress of people's
liberation.**

Samir Amin

*(The World We Wish To See - Revolutionary Objectives In The
Twenty-First Century)*

Humanist Campaign against Religious Exploitation of a Child

Babu Gogineni

It was on the lazy Sunday morning of 16 August that all hell broke loose. There were urgent and breathless phone calls from HM TV, Mahaa TV, INews and Studio N TV Channels asking me if I had heard of Sambhavi.

“Please switch on your TV sir – Sambhavi, a child of 7, is claiming to be the reincarnation of a childhood friend of the Dalai Lama. She speaks with great clarity and precision. She claims Tibet will be free in 2010, that there will be a great event in 2012, that the Dalai Lama is a friend of hers



and that he would visit her soon in Surya Nandi temple in Kurnool District. It seems the child is in touch with the Buddhist leader by telepathy. Sambhavi is also saying that the Telugu Soothsayer of medieval times Veerabrahmendra Swamy's predictions will come true in 2012 and 2014. Her caretaker Usha Rani says she has miraculous powers. Would you like to comment?”

I was being invited to participate in live discussions on these channels; already Dr. Vijayam and Mr. Lavanam were on one of them, speaking from the Atheist Center in Vijayawada. There were some orthodox Hindus as well on the panels. My response was:



Sambhavi

“It is nonsense, because rebirth implies we have a soul which can retain memories. No one has shown that the soul exists and we all know that the seat of memory is the brain which dies with the rest of the body. Claims of rebirth are culturally conditioned and we do not hear of them in Muslim or Christian or African societies. No claim of rebirth has ever been shown to be true either in Hinduism or in Buddhism”.

The Dalai Lama

“But sir, they are also showing video clips of the child with the Dalai Lama. It seems he approves of it, and he has accepted that she was his childhood friend”.

“Have you verified this claim with the Dalai Lama? In any case, I would not be really surprised – you know that the Dalai Lama believes in reincarnation. He also is desperate that as he gets old he has to do his best to get Tibet on the world's radar again. This year is the 50th year since the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet and it is the 60th year of the People's Republic of China. The timing is good for some gimmicks! Some of the Dalai Lama's

religious beliefs are ridiculous or even dangerous”.

“But sir, is he not the most important Buddhist leader?”

“Not really! There are 300 million Buddhists in the world, and the Buddhists are divided into Hinayana (or Theravada), Mahayana and Vajrayana sects. The Vajrayana Buddhists are associated with Tantric practices and most of the Tibetans are associated with that school of Buddhism. The Buddha did not believe in a soul or in a rebirth of this kind, so many Buddhists are opposed to what the Dalai Lama preaches. And there are not many Vajrayana Buddhists – in fact only 6 million Tibetans if you take the Dalai Lama's own figures - or 2.5 million if you believe the Chinese government. And amongst the Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhists there are again 4 sects, and the Dalai Lama is the head of just one of them – the Gelugpa sect. He does not represent all Buddhists. Of course he is well known because he is also a Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

“Did you know that the Dalai Lama



rebelled and escaped from Tibet at a time when China wanted to tax the income of his institutions? When he was in Tibet it is said that he had over 6000 serfs, and that the base for this ascetic who renounced all was the 1000-room Potala Palace!”

“Sir, please come to the studio and say this. So we want to show your point of view”.

And so was spoiled another Sunday (and many other weekdays and weekends since then). And from then on we have been on dozens of TV discussions and public meetings: several colleagues like JVV leaders T.V. Rao, Ramesh, Radical Humanist C.L.N. Gandhi, Rationalist lawyer Madhusudan, feminist Volga, head of CEASE Child Labour and industrialist Kotapati Murahari Rao, and myself.

Our Questions

We coordinated strategy and arguments: in discussions we asked what Sambhavi's real name was in this life, and what her name was when she was a friend of the Dalai Lama in her previous birth. As Sambhavi is reputed to have met with the Madhyamika philosopher Nagarjuna who died many centuries ago, we wondered why she did not meet with the Buddha as well. We asked who Sambhavi's real parents were as only Usha Rani who is parading as Sambhavi's caretaker seemed to be around. What were the economic interests behind this claim being made, we queried. And if the Dalai Lama was visiting Surya Nandi to inaugurate Buddha Vijayam - the ashram being built for Sambhavi - what are his interests? He has been talking of late in several voices, making even some Tibetans angry: he offered to be reborn even before he died; on another occasion he said that he would be reborn outside Tibet, and as a girl; on yet another occasion, outraging the really orthodox, he even said his reincarnation could be elected by the people of Tibet! Is he coming to nominate his successor? We also pointed out that the soothsayer Veerabrahmendra Swamy's predictions were hardly what someone



could take credibly – there is no authentic text, nothing has been predicted in advance in a verifiable manner – there is only myth, legend, pulp fiction and popular cinema around his personality.

In any case, this silly salad of adult superstition, unconvincing stories of ancient soothsayers occupied TV screens for the next 2 months in Andhra Pradesh. While TV5, NTV and MAHAA TV turned a skeptical eye towards the developments, the highest TRP rated TV9 had several special documentaries. Their team travelled to the Dalai Lama's headquarters Dharamshala in North India to discuss with the officials of the so-called Tibet Parliament in exile and the so-called Tibetan Government in exile. Almost all the channels boasted special interviews and special discussions with the 'spiritualist miracle', celebrity child. Most recently, Sakshi Newspaper which has the largest circulation of all Telugu Newspapers with 1.2 million copies per day shocked us with a mindless analysis of Sambhavi's divinity in a two page Sunday special.



Babu Gogineni

Thanks to all this media promotion, Telugu people soon knew everything about Sambhavi who is a lovable looking child with charming mannerisms: she was the daughter of Bengali brahmins living in Varanasi, she was made a sanyasin at the age of 4, and once she went into a trance and travelled to the Himalayas where she met the Dalai Lama and also read Tibetan manuscripts. The child's caretaker Usha Rani claimed that Sambhavi expressed concern for the Dalai Lama's health and suggested that the Dalai Lama became healthy again after Sambhavi prayed for him. We all knew that Sambhavi holds regular telepathic conferences with the Dalai Lama with regards to the future of Tibet and that there were many secret

matters that they discussed. We were told that she speaks fluently 5 languages, blesses whoever prostrates in front of her, and that the devotees were quickly benefitted emotionally and economically. Sambhavi came to Surya Nandi with a famous film singer's family and when she arrived here she immediately started speaking Telugu and chose to establish her ashram there!

What did Sambhavi Say?

But all the reports from the gushing journalists, the charming childish talk of Sambhavi and the halo of the Dalai Lama's support could not hide the real estate business being set up in and around Surya Nandi, the eagerness of Usha Rani to promote her ward's supernatural claims, or the incoherence of the child and the political nature of the statements being made through her. Here is a sample:

- India is doing well because India has Buddhism
- China and Pakistan are bad people. They will be punished.
- Tibet will be free in 2016; China will become democratic in 2012.



- I was born for Tibet's freedom and I will do anything for Tibet's freedom

- There is a giant statue of the Buddha in the soil in Tibet – it went inside the soil because otherwise China would take it away. It will emerge from the earth as a ray of light.

- The Dalai Lama was the diety Balabadhra in the past life and I (Sambhavi) was the goddess Ugra Taraka Devi

- Lord Siva lives in Tibet. Hanuman will go to Tibet, worship Siva after which he will free Tibet.

- All non-vegetarians will be destroyed when Veerabrahmendra Swami will be reborn as Veerabhoga Vasantarayalu in Surya Nandi on 14 January 2012. He will also pull out the eyes and the hearts of non-believers.

- Jagan Mohan Reddy, son of late Rajasekhar Reddy will become the next Chief Minister of AP

How to Stop This?

The constant media hype and the frenzy that accompanied it, the announcement of the impending visit of the Dalai Lama and the daily challenge to our sanity were priming us up for action. Now there was also news that India's richest industrialist and one of the world's wealthiest individuals Anil Ambani donated Rs. 1 Crore (Rs. 10 million or USD 200,000) to Sambhavi/Surya Nandi temple. The Dalai Lama, it was announced, would come on 21 December 2009 when he would inaugurate Sambhavi's ashram.

There was now an urgency, for action as things seemed to be rapidly getting out of hand. What if the Dalai Lama arrives as he threatens on 21 December 2009 in



Surya Nandi and declares that Sambhavi would be his successor? Even if he did not do that, what if he declares Buddha Vijayam as Sambhavi's ashram? If that was done, Sambhavi would never be able to have a normal childhood. This is how in Nepal Hindu maidens are made Kumaris, who are till puberty considered divine and after nearly a decade of isolation from the rest of society are thrown out of temples to fend for themselves.

So, I started putting together a strategy, working with colleagues and collaborators and in discussion with Prof. Narendra Nayak, President of Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations. We had to do a number of things:

a). The AP State Human Rights Commission had to be approached.

b). The National Commission for the Protection of Rights of Children should be alerted.

c). Cooperation of fellow Humanists and progressives needed to be invited.

d). Ground should be prepared for international action, and Roy Brown should be consulted for campaigning at the UN in Geneva once local remedies are tried out for the situation.

e). It must be ascertained whether the Dalai Lama and Anil Ambani really supported Sambhavi.

f). The question of Sambhavi needed to be made a house hold issue for which the media needed to be involved.

In co-operation with Sri Kotapati Murahari Rao, President of CEASE Child Labour and Treasurer of the Rationalist Association of India, and the well known novelist Pydi Chandra Latha a list of possible collaborators was drawn up and MVV, JVV and Rationalist Forum of Hyderabad were also consulted.

We first approached Prof. Shantha Sinha, the Ramon Magasaysay Award winner for Human Rights and India's first Chairperson of the National Commission for the Protection of the Rights of Children who heard our arguments about Sambhavi with great sympathy. She even suggested that the Commission itself could approach the High Court to save the child.

20 Nov: Universal Child Rights Day

We then announced to the media that our day of public action would be 20 Nov 09 which marks 20 years of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and 50 years since the UN's Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

The response from the media was most helpful for the progress of the campaign. Zee 24 hours was extraordinary: one of their officials said, 'we never realized that there was this other angle to the Sambhavi story. We would like to partner with you all in this Human Rights campaign. Please come to our studios where we will organize a 2-hr live discussion on Sambhavi. Then our cameras will follow you throughout the day and we will come with you to the Human Rights Commission. I agreed, on the condition that no astrologers or religious fundamentalists be invited – I was merely repeating my TV 9 appeal of 17 August that this was a Human Rights

question, not a debate about rebirth. Zee readily agreed and involved many of the co-petitioners.

At the Office of the State Human Rights Commission, HM TV and I News had their OB Vans, from where they covered the events live. The media was present in full force and number to hear what we were going to say to the Honorable Subhashan Reddy, the former Chief Justice of Madras High Court and later Chief Justice of Kerala High Courts and now Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission.

Mr. Justice Subhashan Reddy heard us all with great sympathy and concern for the child. Present and involved were A.B.K. Prasad, senior journalist and former Chairperson of the Official Languages Commission, the noted feminist and editor Kondaveeti Satyavati, feminist and leader of Asmita, Mrs. Volga, the educationists Prabhakara Sastri, the child rights activist Sri. Achyuth Rao, JVV's T.V. Rao etc. Two children, Ms. Sahasi, grand daughter of MVV's Hanumantha Rao and Arun Gogineni added to the occasion, reminding all how a happy and normal childhood would be. We submitted to the judge respectfully that:

- This was not a religious debate, but a Human Rights struggle.
- Children who have been identified as the reincarnation of a dead person have always been psychologically damaged much before adulthood.
- Sambhavi has the right to play and to a normal childhood and be brought up in the loving care of a mother.
- It appears that the child has since been indoctrinated for nearly 3 years and it had touch with reality. Such mental abuse should attract all the relevant civil and criminal provisions of the law.
- It is not the religious views of the parents but the best interests of a child that are paramount.

We urged the Judge to take action and directions:

- a). For the rehabilitation of Sambhavi into normal life with the help of child psychologists.
- b). To the State government and its relevant departments to take immediate steps to halt the abuse.
- c). To summon Sambhavi's parents and Ms. Usha Rani and the relevant birth records of Sambhavi to ensure that she has not been a victim of abduction and exploitation.
- d). To issue notice to the Dalai Lama to ascertain if he and his organization has a role to play in this.
- e). To issue notice or guidelines to the media so that they will report such matters with sensitivity.

We also submitted that we were offended that a crime of abuse of a child is being portrayed as a spiritual achievement, to the detriment of the child's best interests.

In response, recalling that when previously a child was being used for TV reality shows he had passed orders putting it in the protection of a Government Child Home, the Honorable Judge passed instant orders to the Collector of the Kurnool district to present a report on the parentage of Sambhavi as well as whether the Human Rights of Sambhavi are being violated. In view of the urgency, the Collector was given just 10 days to report – till 30 Nov 09.

Gudilona, Badilona?

Golla Venkatesh worked with me to create a poster and a banner for the campaign with the question 'Sambhavi Gudilona, Badilona? Manavavadula, Hetuvadula Prasna'. (Humanists & Rationalists Ask: Should Sambhavi be in a School or in a Temple?). The curtain was raised for launching a new debate in all sections of society on questions that matter to us all. Along with Sri T.V. Rao of JVV and Sri C.L.N. Gandhi of the IRHA we shared our media responsibilities so that the voice of reason could be heard by a large number of people.

And following a 30 minute discussion on

Live TV on TV9 where I even debated the obnoxious Usha Rani, Tirupataiah, a young and dashing journalist from Eenadu Newspaper called me asking for help and moral support for the stories he was planning to write and for which he was being threatened by Mrs. Usha Rani. I offered our full cooperation.

But what about the Administration?

The Child Welfare department did nothing for Sambhavi in the last 2 and a half months. The Endowments Department took no action since the time Usha Rani illegally occupied the temple. The District Collector who ordered an inquiry by the Nandyal Revenue Divisional Officer (RDO) on 24 November was even reportedly setting up facilities for the Dalai Lama's visit, but showed no interest in the plight of Sambhavi. Could we trust the Administration?

I decided that I would go to Kurnool and Nandyal towns to give evidence to the inquiry even if it was not an entirely safe thing to do. But I was grateful that Mr. Ramabrahmam from JVV and Mr. KVR Reddy from MVV volunteered to come on behalf of their organizations, and to help with the security. They never let me address any meeting or even the press without them standing behind me. Everyone said that because of the physical build of KVR we were safe from any mischief and attacks – jokes that KVR took with good humour. KVR even offered his car for the visit to Nandyal, while JVV's lawyer Madhusudan (well known for his initiative in the case filed against the spurious claims of fish medicine to cure asthma) and Mr. Suresh Kumar offered the reassurance and support for the legalities and logistics of meeting with the Collector in Kurnool and the RDO in Nandyal.

As expected, and planned, the meeting with the Collector was widely reported, both in TV and in newspapers. After 2 months of seeming inaction and negligence, the Collector was suddenly put under public

pressure. He did not have the courtesy of offering a seat to our delegation and even showed his impatience that we went to the Human Rights Commission rather than to him. We made it clear to him that India is a Secular Country and Constitution; that the Dalai Lama needed no special treatment when he was coming to the district to perform a private religious duty etc.

The next day was when we met with Dr. Madhavi Latha, the former scientist from ICRISAT who is now the RDO and the Inquiry officer, along with the Deputy Superintendent of Police Samayjohn Rao and Zubeida Begum the Integrated Child Development Scheme Officer. Dr. Madhavi Latha met us after the first questioning of Usha Rani for 4 hours: defying the notices to appear, Usha Rani arrived without Sambhavi or the child's supposed father Soumya Acharya from Varanasi! "We will not bring Sambhavi to the inquiry as she is a child", said one of the persons present there. "There is no need to bring her", said her lawyer to the TV channels waiting for his sound bite. We made a full presentation, made our arguments and also gave the RDO details of people who were claiming to be victims of Usha Rani's deception in the name of Sambhavi's spiritual powers.

The Hindu Right Wingers

TV9 was covering live and their journalist announced that the situation was tense and violence was expected between the two groups that were gathering there. Already a group belonging to the Student Federation of India who arrived with no prior information to us - but to support our petition - was arrested by the police and taken away. Members and leaders of the Hindu right wing VHP and RSS started shouting slogans against us, giving dire warnings to Rationalists for interfering with Hindu religious affairs. They picked up a fight with me. The police advised us to leave as the VHP activists were becoming increasingly difficult and aggressive.

We filed the petition to save Sambhavi; she

has to go to school and cannot be exploited in the name of religion. She has shown no miracles and should not be called a goddess. And we filed the petition not just on behalf of the Rationalists but on behalf of all the religious and non religious people who were morally offended by how the child was being abused and whose humanitarian instincts were waiting for a formal avenue to express themselves.

Our petition and campaign was on all their behalf.

The official inquiry was conducted for another 2 days. Despite the empty boasting of Usha Rani's lawyer and threats of legal action against us, Sambhavi was finally produced in front of the inquiry. Usha Rani was ordered out of the temple by the Endowments Department and the local villagers also largely expressed their disbelief in Sambhavi's miraculous powers. We were confidentially passed on recordings of telephone threats made by Usha Rani to some journalists. Others have received threatening phone calls. We are keeping a record of those numbers.

The District Collector has sent an interim report to the Human Rights Commission saying that there are no miraculous powers to the child, that Usha Rani had no legal custody of the child, and that she and Sambhavi's supposed father were making so many contradictory statements that the administration wants to verify whether he is the real parent of the child. They were not cooperating. The Collector is right: Usha Rani says she is 48 years old, and that she completed her BA from Mysora University, a University no one has heard of. She says she does not remember where the university is located nor the year when she passed the exams. Neither she nor 36 year old Soumya Acharya are able/willing to produce the birth certificate of the child. Soumya Acharya says he will not reveal the mother's name. They say that it is a Brahmin tradition to conduct home schooling. Of course, parents have that right but only if they do not exploit their

children – and if that was true, why is Soumya Acharya's second daughter being sent to school, defying their family traditions? And when Soumya Acharya went on TV and said that as per their traditions they are not supposed to touch others, it is an incitement to the practice of untouchability. Our lawyer is looking into this and collecting the relevant TV clipping. Eenadu, Andhra Jyothy, Vaartha, Saakshi and Praja Sakti Newspapers are gathering and publishing more evidence.

The Collector has asked for special teams to be dispatched to the respective native places of Soumya Acharya and Usha Rani, confirming our original complaint and suspicion that this child may have been abducted. The collector has ordered that a caretaker and a police constable would be posted with Sambhavi to watch over her till such a time when clarity will emerge about the child's parents; he passed orders that Usha Rani and Soumya Acharya were prohibited from taking Sambhavi from the village without government permission. As I write this, the Minister for Education has come on TV saying he does not exclude the Govt. taking over the welfare of the child. The Home Minister has ordered a Crime Investigation Department inquiry into the matter.

People continue to ask us why we are interested in Sambhavi when there are millions of other children. We say, there are millions of children all of who deserve our concern and help, but they are not being paraded as gods and goddesses. And we say that every child has to be rescued child by child. We started with Sambhavi because if we do not take up the case of

Sambhavi no one else would. But this can only be a small contribution to a national effort in a country which is 139th in the comity of nations for living standards and has the world's biggest concentration of child labour. We all have our duty cut out to help the vulnerable children.

I wrote to Anil Ambani about his supposed donation. We have a few more steps to take to put a check on the special treatment being planned for the Dalai Lama during his planned visit on 21 Dec. and also to help rehabilitate Sambhavi. The Right to Information Act will help in that. And if the Dalai Lama still insists on coming to inaugurate the ashram proposed in the name of Sambhavi, then the scandal will be treated with the full force and outrage that it will deserve and we will also write to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee. All these steps we will take. But one thing is already achieved: not only did we touch the common people's hearts, not only did we expose the hysteria in society as a crime against a child, we also convinced the main players and changed the terms of the debate. Our responsibility in the matter has increased because of the public's positive expectations despite the sloganeering of the right winger VHP and the RSS. But the only test of victory for our efforts and our campaign would be when Sambhavi is freed from the clutches of her own people so that she could grow to her full potential. The first positive steps have been taken.

BS

***Babu Gogineni is the International
Director of the International Humanist
and Ethical Union***

**God being everything, the real world and man are nothing. God
being truth, justice, and infinite life, man is falsehood, inequality,
and death. God being master, man is the slave.**

Michael Bakunin
(God and the State)

Reincarnation, Rebirth and Past-Life Regression Therapy

A Rationalist Critique

Narendra Nayak

Introduction:

The recent trend in some sections of the Indian visual media is the topic of rebirth and associated quackery. In one of the channels the show started with sessions of 'hypnotism', taking people back to their past births, and 'treatment' for many of their problems of the present birth which are allegedly caused by deeds in the past life!

There is a 'Dr.' Trupti Jain, along with a moderator, putting the person who had

volunteered into what is called as a 'hypnotic trance'. That is followed by question-answer sessions along with re-enactment of events which are supposed to have happened in past births. This is followed by 'counseling' and 'therapy', with the subject admitting at the end of the session that he or she is feeling better. The ill-informed Indian middle-class audience is fascinated by these antics and the viewership must have definitely gone up. Like all other talk shows, in these too the episodes start with sessions involving some 'celebrities'. Now, it is the hoi polloi whose

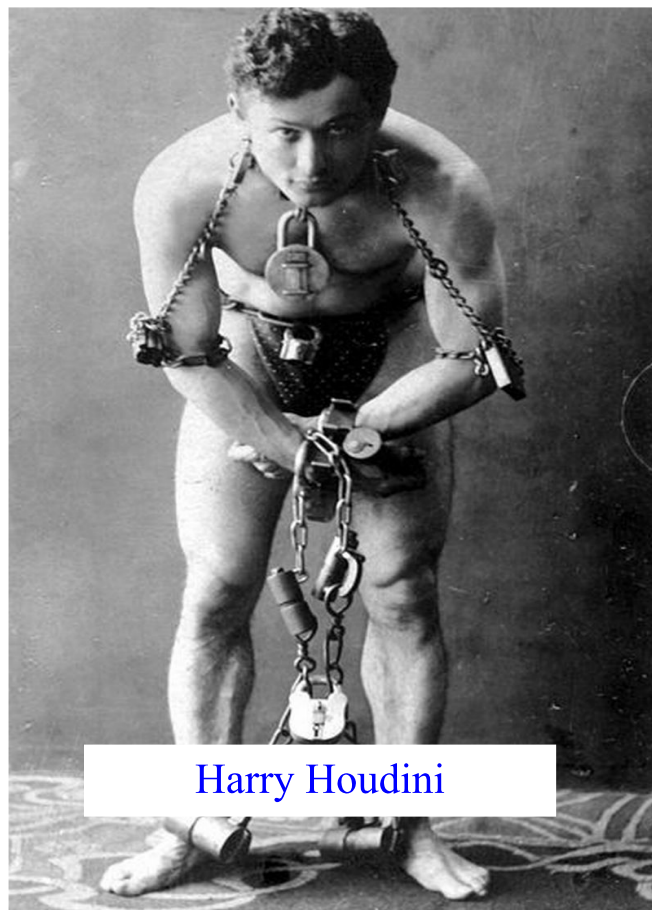
past lives are on public display. Not to be left behind, many regional channels have followed suit and there must be zillions of such past life programs being shown with a gullible lot of our viewers lapping up the tripe being served as science.

Many are under the impression that this is the latest in the field of mental health, not realising that this nonsense has been in existence for more than a century and



volunteered into what is called as a 'hypnotic trance'. That is followed by question-answer sessions along with reenactment of events which are supposed to have happened in past births. This is followed by 'counseling' and 'therapy', with the subject admitting at the end of the session that he or she is feeling better. The ill-informed Indian middle-class audience is fascinated by these antics and the viewership must have definitely gone up. Like all other talk shows, in these too the episodes start with sessions involving some 'celebrities'. Now, it is the hoi polloi whose past lives are on public display. Not to be left behind, many regional channels have followed suit and there must be zillions of such past life programs being shown with a gullible lot of our viewers lapping up the tripe being served as science.

Many are under the impression that this is the latest in the field of mental health, not realising that this nonsense has been in existence for more than a century and has been dismissed as a hoax a long, long time ago. There have been many famous cases, like the reincarnate Andy Murphy, reincarnations of famous doctors like Cayce, Arigo and many others. They have been sensationalized in the print media even by very conservative publications like the Readers Digest. Séances which have been proved to be frauds by eminent magicians like Houdini, and even novels which became best sellers based on these themes have been popular in the past century. There have been movies based on these, like the classics Madhumathi, Milan, reincarnation of Peter Proud etc., some of which have been hits at the box office. There has been 'research' on rebirth, a lot of which, I should say all of which, has been discredited as the case histories were proved to be cooked up. One of the universities in Rajasthan had a department of parapsychology which had UGC grants but was closed down when investigations proved that data was cooked up to provide interesting cases. We have some people in nationally famous institutions who have cooked up data and have got their PhDs by

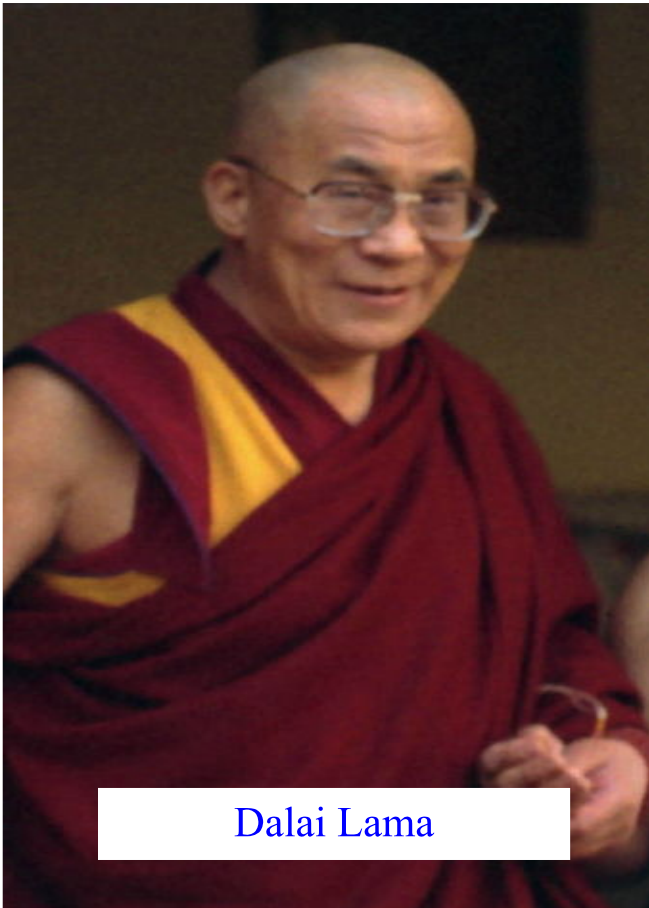


Harry Houdini

quoting cases only indicated as alphabets under the guise of patient confidentiality, thus preventing any investigations of cases of reincarnation quoted by them.

Shambhavi and the Dalai Lama

We also have celebrities who supposedly are reborn again and again as famous people, like the Dalai Lama and his coterie who are all supposed to be reincarnations of famous religious leaders and are worshipped as the living Buddha by his gullible devotees. More recently there is the case of reincarnation in Andhra Pradesh of a little girl called Shambhavi, whose rebirth claims have been allegedly certified by no less a person than the most famous reincarnation of them all- the Dalai Lama himself! The same Dalai Lama who supposedly is more rational than many other religious leaders. This is of course not saying much, because the irrational behaviour of many of them, such as the Pope, is worse. The Dalai Lama whose supposedly broad-minded and liberal views are legendary is not free from superstitions, as evidenced by his support of rebirth,



Dalai Lama

Tibetan medicine and a variety of such beliefs. In the last mentioned case of Shambhavi in Andhra Pradesh, we have moved the Human Rights commission of Andhra Pradesh asking for the protection of the minor girl Shambhavi, as we feel that this little girl is being exploited by some unscrupulous adults for their own nefarious ends. The campaign started as an anti-superstition one and has now got a wider perspective by making it an issue of rights of the child and the exploitation of a minor. This campaign started by Babu Gogineni, though initially opposed by many under the impression that it was a case of opposition to religious beliefs of a community, got wide support when people understood the true nature of this issue.

These episodes of rebirth, along with the hoopla surrounding them, and the claims of the whole thing being 'scientific', require that there should be discussion on many specific issues connected to them, both ethical and scientific. If we take up the biological questions what passes from one to another during reincarnation pops up. One has to query as to whether it is a

molecule, an atom or a cell that travels from one to the other during this process. Or is it something sub atomic, like rays or particles? How is it that only some people reincarnate and not all? If reincarnation is only for humans then what can explain the huge population growth? If it is claimed that the reincarnation is across species then at what stage does the capacity to be so arise? Do bacteria and viruses also reincarnate?

Well, I am sure that the explanation will be that there is none and that it is an unexplained truth. When extraordinary claims are made we need extraordinary proof, but even ordinary proof is not coming forth. Some examples of child prodigies are provided as proof, cases that have no relevance since if a newborn is a reincarnation it should exhibit all traits of its past birth at the time of delivery itself. But, the usual finding is that they do so only like others, maybe a little earlier than many of their age and social group. The only so called evidence that is offered are quotations from religious texts which cannot be accepted as evidences with any credibility. If they are further questioned then the reply is that it is a matter of faith and hence beyond question!

Here we have to understand who the vested interests behind these cases are. Past life regression therapy is not an accepted form of therapy in any standard text-book of psychiatry. If any qualified psychiatrist registered as one in any state or Indian medical-council promotes/practices it, the registration can be canceled for professional misconduct. So, it is obvious that the 'Dr' who 'treats' patients on TV cannot be a qualified practitioner of any system of medicine. If one goes to web site of this 'institution' offering past life regression therapy all what one sees are the testimonials from patients, which are not considered as evidence at all in science.

But, we have many people claiming that their phobias in the present life have been traced to events in their past life and so on.

The claim is also made often that when these events were discovered and counseling done, they got a lot of relief! Well, these are classic cases of two lies canceling each other out! What happened in the past life itself is questionable and hence the suggestions may act as just as any ordinary mental suggestion and may have some effects. One can also use these as a convenient excuse to explain the misdeeds of the present existence. One can always be on the lookout for a scapegoat for ones misdeeds, and some event happening in one's past life is as good as any. So, this would explain the claims put forward by those who say they have been healed by 'past life regression therapy'. In the west there are fringe groups which perform this therapy followed by what is called a rebirthing experience resulting in a clean slate for the subject, probably after which new misdeeds can be committed on a newly opened account!

'Past life' can be used as an excuse for many other things. For example, one can always justify the caste system under the excuse that the 'lower' castes are born so

as to atone for the sins of their previous births. Those who enjoy all the best things of life at the cost of others can always have the excuse that this is due to the good deeds performed in their past life. It could also keep the exploited from protesting, under the reassurance that their exploiters will be punished in their next life for what they are doing now! Though it is difficult for us to understand why we should be punished or rewarded for having done something in a past existence that we are not even aware of, one could explain that that awareness could be brought by the right combinations of suggestions. And where do these come from? Naturally from the past life regression therapist or from some holy scripture which is unquestionable! So, here we have the judge, jury and the prosecutor all rolled into one and whatever they say will be irrefutable.

Personal Anecdotes

This write up would not be complete without a few personal experiences. There was a very famous case of reincarnation in a place called Navalgund in Dharwad district. There was a boy who was called D.C Saheba- the reason being that he was supposed to be the reincarnation of a Deputy Commissioner from Punjab who had died an untimely death. The boy was supposed to be narrating incidents of his past life with great accuracy. When I reached this place, I made enquiries about him to learn his case history. The villagers told me that they had driven away the whole family from their village. Their reason was that they were bringing a bad reputation to the village by tutoring the child to narrate cooked up stories.

Once, about 15 years back, the the Vice Chancellor of Mangalore University Dr. S. Gopal, was scheduled to deliver a lecture on reincarnation at a conference on the same topic at Mangalore. Three days before this, the Research Students Association of this university had invited me to deliver a lecture demonstration on



A Hindu religious painting on rebirth

manifestations of the supernatural. During the question answer session one student asked me about rebirth. I told him that he was addressing the question to the wrong person. I told him to ask the same to the Vice Chancellor of the University who was a physicist. I told him to clarify from him as what would pass from one living organism to the other during the process- whether it was an atom, a molecule, a ray or a particle! The result was that the Vice Chancellor's lecture was not held three days later because he did not show up at the conference on rebirth!

I had to travel all the way to Athens to convince a very senior citizen aged about eighty that there was no rebirth. He was a member of a cult called Radha Swami Satsang Beas, which had brainwashed him into thinking that one single mistake from him would cause the rebirth of five generations of his ancestors as ants, hundreds of times. His guilt complex was causing so many problems for him that his son invited me to stay in Athens for a week to convince his father that there was nothing such as rebirth. I did not know how far I succeeded in this, but it was an eye opener for the senior citizen who had believed that all Indians had been reborn at least a dozen times and were in full knowledge of their past births. In fact, I was the first Indian whom he had met who was not a member of this cult! Till then all the

Indians he had met were members of this cult and carefully screened so that they would say only those things which were the beliefs of this cult.

Conclusion

Rebirth is a good way of explaining the karma theory, suppressing any rebellion against exploitation, and now a good way to explain iones misdeeds! The latest uses are to increase the TRP ratings of TV channels, sell quack therapies like past life regression and birthing experiences! In our country we have also cases where a rich person gets reborn in a poverty stricken house-hold and the relationship develops between them leading to the improvement of the economic status of the former! We never ever come across a case where it happens the other way round.

For the superstition-ridden gullible people, the TV channels looking for viewership and those selling their quack remedies, the idea of rebirth has been a blessing. As for me it would be good for all who read this to remember that you are reading this due to the misdeeds of your past lives and I am writing this to atone for the sins committed in my past many lives! Going through this article is past life regression therapy, which is going to absolve all of us the trouble caused by its own ill effects!

BS

**Truth is not necessarily what we have become accustomed to
imagine as true for centuries and something being time-
honoured is no sufficient reason for its acceptance.**

Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya

(Indian Philosophy – A Popular Introduction)

The Appeal of Rationalism

Nihar Ranjan Acharya

Rationalism is not speculation – it is utterly practical. It is not a philosophy – it is very down-to-earth. It wants to transform people, not just to stuff their minds with futile, impotent ideas. All ideas of religions as such are impotent. They pretend much, but when you go deep into them, you will always find them empty of all reality. They promise, but they never deliver. They create beautiful mansions in the air. They are artists in creating dreams. And those who become enchanted with those dreams are very unrealistic, because their lives will be wasted. And by the time they become aware that they have been chasing dreams, it will be too late. They never come face to face with reality. And it is only reality that liberates.

Rationalism is not an “ism” as such. It is a practical methodology. If you understand its ways, it is going to transmute you from lower animal to higher asking animal. It is not interested in giving you great ideas. Its basic emphasis is how to give you a little more awareness. As you know, an ounce of awareness is far more valuable than the whole Himalayas of philosophy. An inch of becoming more conscious is far better than travelling thousands of miles in your dreams. Rationalism is more scientific than philosophic – scientific in the sense that the criterion of truth has to be a practical result.

A rationalist carries all symptoms of a good citizen. She is one who contributes her best for the well-being of the family, society and the country of which she is an integral part. She has responsibilities towards her family and the nation. She is not concerned about her well-being only, but also about the larger good of the society



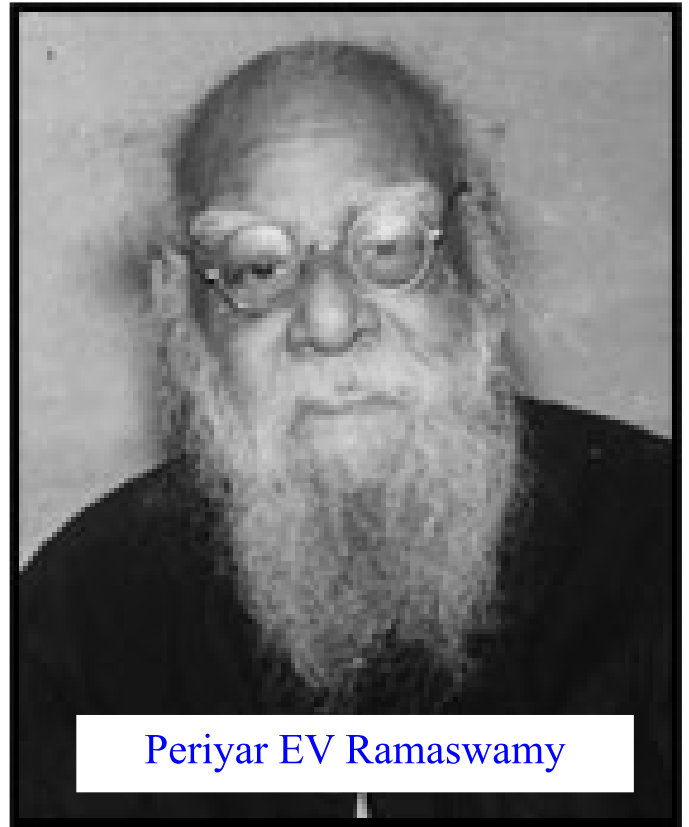
and the country. Through love, truthfulness, selfless service and hard work, a rationalist hammered out a rich, beautiful and glowing personality, the like of which can be found only in centuries. A rationalist never promotes blind faith in so-called miracles and other supernatural phenomena and thereby strictly denies the dependency on god men, magicians, tantriks, and other power brokers; curtails freedom of thought and action; subdues intelligence and quest for inquiry; inhibits mental development especially in children and emerging youths. A rationalist knows that blind faith could destroy people's health, as happened in Mumbai when gullible people began drinking the dirty sea water; it could destroy people's wealth, as when precious milk went down the drain in the belief that idols were drinking it; it could even destroy lives, when the gullible sacrifice children's lives on the advice of so-called god men and tantriks. If one must believe in miracles, it is best to believe in the miracle of life, in the miracle of the human body, and strive to find ways to bring down child mortality check female infanticide and keep humans away from deadly diseases. And it is best to believe in the miracle of the universe, and

strive to explore the secrets that lie strewn in the great expanse of the universe.

Several biologists tell us today that we do not know much about the science of the human being in depth. We are only scratching the surface of this great science, whereas this is the science that rationalism teaches us. It is a science; a science of man in depth, dealing with man's all round growth and all the blessings that follow from that growth. Hence, it can be studied, controlled, communicated, checked and verified. That is how rationalism developed this profound science of man in depth, so that a human being can grow beyond the limitations placed by the so-called religion and so-called religious people.

Knowledge is to know what you do not know. And you will never know unless you ask questions. This is rationalism which teaches us to ask questions so that on the process we will arrive at the truth. He who does not ask questions is a fool of a lifetime. I believe that rationalists are the most evolved 'asking animals' on this planet. And being the most evolved species, a rationalist should go for the meaning of any word used in any context, even for the implied meaning of word instead of catching the word alone.

Throughout history, from Socrates to our modern age brainy individuals, people have sought answers to the fundamental questions of life. Rational human beings who are brave and bold are basically investigating, inquiring and science loving individuals. Socrates of Athens and Bruno of Italy had to die as they tried and asked awkward questions. Socrates was trying to awaken his fellow Athenians who were under the grip of ignorance. Bruno was trying to open and widen the path of science and in the process the wrong doings of the then Papal Administration were exposed. Throughout the ages, rationalists were the brave individuals who reformed various things by asking questions. Rationalists counter superstition, aim to promote an open and just society, endorse



scientific method and recognize the importance of human emotions and imaginations.

Being a rationalist, if I say that the so-called creator 'god' is nothing but our creation like a conjurer's illusion; and like an amnesic conjurer who has forgotten his own sleight of hand, we take the illusion for reality. When religion says god is omnipotent, there I would like to put a question – could god build a wall so high that he could not jump over it? If he were omnipotent, he could build such an unjumpable wall. But by the same token of his omnipotence, he could jump over it. What the debaters did not see was that both the walls, and its Athletic Builder, were equally figments of their imagination - as was the debate. The moral problems of god's existence centre around the question: if a benevolent and all-powerful god exists, why does he allow bad things to happen to good people? The answer often provided is that it's all part of a divine plan which we can't see and therefore can't understand. This makes god sound like a Big Brother who works strictly on a need-to-know basis while manipulating our minds and actions. Here, Periyar's slogan needs to be

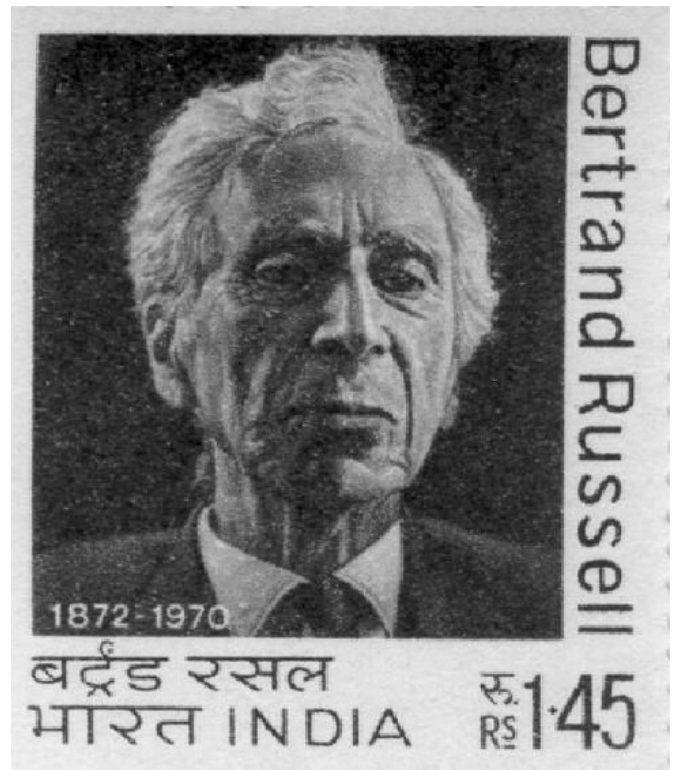
addressed: *Forget God; Think of Humanity.*

Science has triumphed over so many things and human being can be invisible, thereby diminishing god's kingdom. A recent breakthrough has kindled hopes of fusing fact with fiction in times to come. Scientists at the University of Berkeley in California, USA announced that they were very close to developing materials that could render people invisible. The team led by Xiang Zhang has come out with a material that can control the direction of travel of visible light. It can bend itself around objects, thus hiding them from view. A cloak made from such material could render anything from people to large objects like ships and tanks invisible. The startling find has caught the fancy of the old and young alike.

We see objects because they scatter the light that strikes them, reflecting some of it back to the eye. But the wonder material, also known as 'meta-material', curves light waves completely around the object like a river flowing around a rock. An observer looking at the cloaked object would then see light from behind it – making it seem to disappear. The object would not even cast a shadow.

So, the technology is promising and breakthrough is breathtaking, but what about its applications? Apart from the very obvious military applications what, if any, real-life applications of an invisibility cloak one could think of. Perhaps an invisibility cloak on all the dirt and muck around us would make our lives so beautiful. The slum just facing our posh colony or the stinking potholes on the roads, the idols that are dominating, neglecting human lives could be easily taken care of. Poverty, pollution, corruption, illiteracy, the concept of god – all gone the moment we drape an invisibility cloak around them.

Today, we have a society where, in spite of all the gadgets of civilizations, there are so many human problems and, above all, the threat of nuclear war and violence. The



hand that rocks a cradle and the hand that throws a bomb and kills a whole family – in both you can see the same hand; but it is rationalism which teaches us how to change this hand to that hand? I often quote Bertrand Russell in this connection. He was an agnostic, not a man of religion, but seeing the post-war situation, he says in his book entitled *Impact of Science on Society*: 'Unless man increases in wisdom as much as knowledge, increase of knowledge will be increase of sorrow.' A rationalist should adopt this teaching of Russell and practice being more loving. To practice being more loving, create a love account. Each day, make a few deposits in this very reserve by doing something small to add joy to the life of someone around you. The means to gain happiness is to throw out for oneself like a spider in all directions an adhesive web of love, and to catch in all that comes.

I would love to end with Periyar's words: "Rationalist that I am, I have no attachment what so ever to god, religion, literature or language. I shall talk only of that which is acceptable to intelligence, that which does well to the people and that which enlightens them".



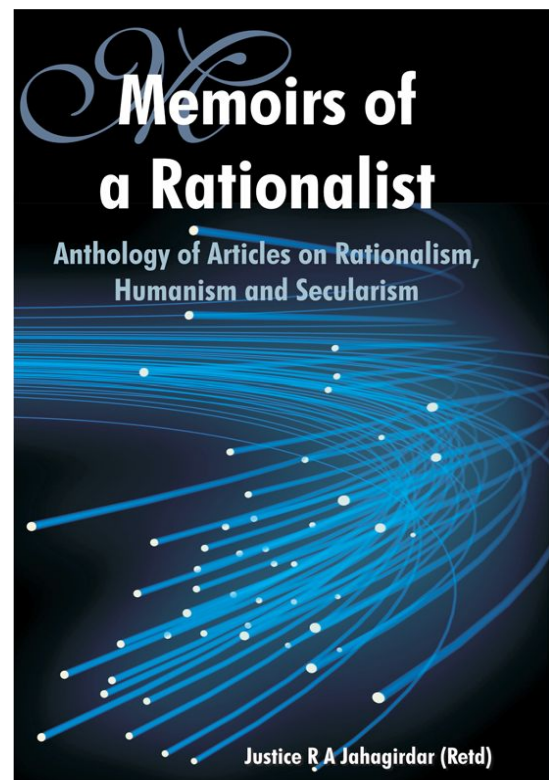


Views and Reviews of a Rationalist

Prabhakar Nanawaty

First of all we must appreciate the efforts put up by Rationalist Foundation for bringing out the anthology of articles on rationalism, humanism and secularism written by an ardent rationalist Justice R A Jahagirdar (Retd). It is surprising to know that except for a few booklets, there were no books to his credit till date though he is writing for last 25-30 years for journals like *Radical Humanist*, *Freedom First* etc. regularly. Though late than never, this book, ***Memoirs of a Rationalist***, brings out rationalistic views on various burning issues like terrorism, Darwinism, law and order issues, judicial activism etc in a single book. The topics of discussion in these articles range from important historical events like the destruction of the library at Alexandria, Buddhism, to Evolution, Caliphate movement to the current topics like freedom of the press, Police Investigation, etc. Rationalism and its other side Humanism form the common binding principle of all these articles. In fact, the issues that were hoisted in the book by the author are not going to vanish as soon as they were raised and commented upon. But they will go on lingering from time to time and it is the duty of thinkers, writers and rationalists to air their views to educate the readers.

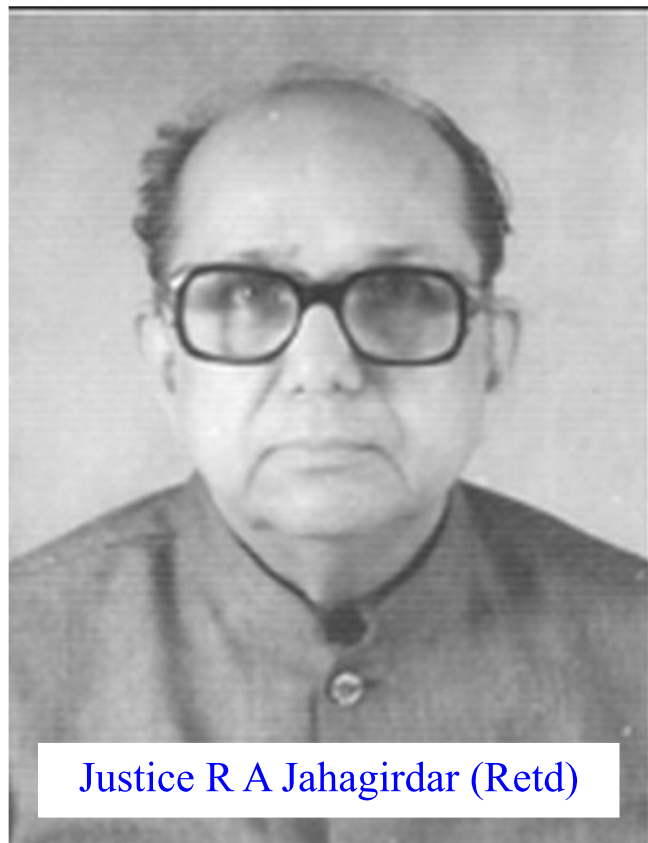
The book contains in all 34 articles covering the subjects like biographies, judiciary aspects, science, superstitions,



secularism, Indian policing, etc which appears to have been written in the last 2-3 years and are still fresh in the minds of the readers. The book covers author's observations on subjects like freedom of press, national anthem, judicial activism, democracy in India, human right issues and United Nation's action, religious conversions, etc. Readers might remember the commentaries made by various experts while these issues were cropped up first time. However RA Jahagirdar has something else to say and most of the time readers will feel that he is right. For

example, ordinary readers are perplexed when somebody raises the issue of judicial activism. No one is able to give correct definition of judicial activism. As author puts it rightly “The question must be properly understood by all the persons who extol and who criticize judicial activism. It is unfortunate that some people praise judicial activism while some say the judges are ‘acting smart’. This is partly because these persons have not understood the system of government envisaged by the constitution and prevalent in the country”. While commenting on national anthems in general and Indian national anthem in particular, author traces the historical aspects of the anthem sung by Indians. In fact there should not have been any controversies whether it is *Vande Mataram*... written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee or *Jana Gana Mana*...written by Rabindranath Tagore. Both songs have some positive as well as negative aspects. In fact author confirms that “the Constitution of India does not mention anything about national anthem. The law does not say *Jana Gana Mana*.... is the national anthem. It is recognized as the national anthem on a statement made by Jawaharlal Nehru in the Constituent Assembly on 15 Aug 1948.” In fact to dissolve the issue author suggests *Zenda Uncha Rahe Hamara* would have been an apt anthem which may satisfy both BJP and Muslim community.

While reading articles on Shias and Sunnis, or Caliphate, or Portrait of Prophet by the author, one will appreciate his scholarship on Muslim history, detailing and interpretation of Quran etc. Author is wondering about this unnecessary great divide between Shias and Sunnis which results into inhuman and heartless act and bloodshed. “Even now after 1300 years, the Muslim community stands divided worldwide into two communities. Both the communities believe in one God; both believe in Muhammad as the last prophet. But the hatred between the two communities is deep and permanent”. He comments that the effort to bring all



Muslims and Muslim countries under Pan-Islam has not found a leader or organization. Apart from Osama, the world faces no danger or design from Islam. His opinion punctures the bogey raised by the Western countries and Christian community about the imaginary threat posed if all the Muslim communities joined together. In fact author feels that Osama’s efforts for the cause of Islamic unity and his organization Al Quida has alienated the rest of humanity from Islam. ‘Majority of Islamic countries are opposed to the type of terrorism Osama has indulged in’.

The three articles on evolution – Charles Darwin, Evolution, Creation and Intelligent Design and The “Monkey Trials” – sum up the pseudo-scientific arguments of ID supporters to oppose the theory of evolution and Darwin. In fact the article, The “Monkey” Trials, brings out the opposition faced by Charles Darwin during his life time for putting forth the theory. Surprisingly even till today the controversy has not yet died down.

While commenting upon the necessity of scientific attitude, author comments that

“Science nurtures inquiry; the superstition stifles it. The two are obviously incompatible. To suppress inquiry, freedom of thought, quest for truth is itself immoral and unethical. Supernatural is a foe of science; so also superstition. Every superstition has a shade of supernatural in it; every supernatural is a superstition. To a humanist who believes in autonomy of man both are dangerous”.

While commenting upon Secularism, author wonders that “more than 60 years have gone by, yet the meaning of secularism is neither understood nor clear in meaning to politicians and citizens”. Like water which takes the colour of the thing it mixed with, secularism takes the meaning of the political party which assigns it. Congress claims it is the secular party; Advani insists that Hinduism, being tolerant is the secular religion; communists say that communism being atheist is secular.

As mentioned in the introduction to book, Justice RA Jahagirdar is a voracious reader and a prolific writer whose articles touch all aspects of life. Being a student of history and philosophy, in addition to law and economics and with an added ability of

As mentioned in the introduction to book, Justice RA Jahagirdar is a voracious reader and a prolific writer whose articles touch all aspects of life. Being a student of history and philosophy, in addition to law and economics and with an added ability of penetrating logical thinking he throws light on issues and happenings. The articles in the book highlight this aspect. Justice Jahagirdar puts every issue in its proper perspective by exposing and highlighting the facts hidden from the public by interested parties. The book makes a very interesting reading to penetrate the rationalistic attitude of the author.

Memoirs of a Rationalist
- Justice RA Jhagirdar (Retd)
Published by Rationalist Foundation,
Mumbai,
2009, pp 192, (Not for sale)

BS

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**To a humanist and an atheist, religious conversion has
no meaning. If no two religions are alike, to convert is to
fall from frying pan into fire.**

Justice RA Jhagirdar (Retd)
(Memoirs of a Rationalist)

FIRA – 7th National Conference

26, 27 December 2009, Chennai

R.G.Rao

National Secretary, FIRA

FIRA - 7th National Conference was conducted at Periyar Thidal at Chennai on December 26, 27, 2009.

Mr.V.Nehru welcomed the delegates and Chief Guests. Prof.Narendra Nayak presided in the Inaugural session. Dr.K.Veeramany, President of Dravida Kazhakam and Patron of Chennai Rationalist Forum Inaugurated the 7th Conference. Dr.G.Vijayam, Executive Director of Atheist Centre, and Mr.P.Chander, New Delhi addressed the audience. Dr. Jacob Copeman of Edinburg University released the FIRA Bulletin. Dr.Vijayam released the souvenir of the 7th FIRA Conference.

At 2.30PM, a seminar on "Role of Rationalism in Eradicating Communalism" was held. Mr.G.V.K.Asaan, Research Associate of Madras University presided. Advocate. Arulmozi, , Mr.R.G.Rao of Goa Science Forum, Mr.V.B.Rawat of New Delhi, Mr.Balwinder Singh Barnala Punjab, etc presented papers.

At 4.30 PM, a session on "Role of Media in Propagating Secularism" was conducted. Dr.G.Vijayam chaired the meeting. Mr.T.V.Manoj of Bangalore Rationalist Association, Mr. Prince Ennares Periyar, Chennai addressed the audience.

A Documentary on Mr.B.Premanand named "Mystery Hunter" was exhibited. After dinner, a feature film on "PERIYAR" the famous Rationalist of Tamil Nadu was shown.

The delegate session was held on the second day, 27.12.2009 at 9.30. Mr.Nehru welcomed the delegates and Prof.Narendra Nayak, President of FIRA, presided the session.

Mr U Kalanathan, National Secretary, presented the Organizational Report. He narrated the serious problems of the nation and indicated the importance of the social actions to be taken by FIRA in future.

"Economic inequality has increased tremendously. This is the basis for all social and cultural degradation such as caste oppression, communal and religious and political

terrorism, aggravation of superstitions and evil customs, spread of godmen and astrologers etc.

Mr Kalanathan said the FIRA should fight for the separation of religion from state, enactment of a bill for eradication of superstitions and evil customs, and enactment of a Uniform Civil Code.

Treasurer of FIRA Mr.V.Kumaresan presented the audited accounts

Ninety delegates attended from different states. Representatives from 33 associations were present. The following delegates participated in the discussion: Dr.DNS.Anand of People's Science Centre, Jharkhand, Dr.G.Vijayam, Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, Mr.BVV.Subha Rao, Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangh, RG.Rao, Gora Science Forum, Mrs.Kranthi Potdar, MASNS, Maharashtra, TV.Manoj, Bangalore, Balvinder Singh Barnala, Tarksheel Society Punjab, Reghunath Singh, Arjak Sangh, UP, Vidya Bhushan Rawat, Delhi; Mr.V.Nehru, Chennai Rationalist Forum; Dr.D.Kuruvila, Kerala Yukthivadi Sanghom, Mr.B.Sambasiva Rao, Manava Vikasa Vedika, Hyderabad, etc.

After discussion, the National Secretary's Report and the audited accounts presented by the treasurer were unanimously approved.

Dr.G.Vijayam was selected as the presiding officer for the election of office bearers of National Executive Committee 2010-11.

The following persons were elected unanimously.

1. Patron : Mr.U.Kala Nathan, Kerala
2. President : Prof.Narendra Nayak, Karnataka
3. Vice President : Balwinder Singh Barnala, Punjab
4. National Secretary : Mr. R.G.Rao alias Somu, Goa
5. Secretary's :
 - a) Dr. Dhaneswar Sahoo, Orissa.
 - b) Mr. V.Nehru, Madhura
 - c) Mr. Vidya Bhushan Rawat, New Delhi
 - d) Mr. Milind Deshmukh, Maharashtra
 - e) Mr. Harchand Singh Bhinder, Punjab
6. Treasurer : Sukumaran Dhanuvachapuram, Kerala

Forty one persons from 23 Associations were also elected to the NEC. All existing members of other affiliated associations will continue as NEC. Members.

The 7th FIRA conference was well organized by the Chennai Rationalist Forum and Dravida Kazhagam with all paraphernalia necessary to make it an attractive programme. Dr.K.Veeramani, Mr.V.Kumaresan and Mr.V.Nehru etc were in the fore front in making it a grand function. In all public functions, more than 1000 people participated. Maximum publicity was given through their News Paper "Viduthalai" (the only Rationalists news paper in the world) at Chennai. They have highlighted the great tradition of "Periyar" in making the Conference a grand success.

I extend FIRA's hearty Congratulations as well as gratitude to Chennai Rationalist Forum and Dravida Kazhakam.

The valedictory function, presided by Dr.K.Veeramani, started at 1 PM on 27-12-2009. Dr. A.T. Sabhapathy Mohan, Vice Chancellor of Manon Mariam Sundaranar University gave the valedictory address, Mr.Kumaresan welcomed the gathering. With Mr.Sukumaran Dhanuvachapuram vote of thanks, the 7th Conference of FIRA concluded.

The later stages of Yoga are supposed to lead to some kind of intuitive insight or to a condition of ecstasy, such as the mystics speak of. Whether this is some kind of higher mental state, opening the door to further knowledge, or is merely a kind of self-hypnosis, I do not know. Even if the former is possible, the latter certainly also happens, and it is well-known that unregulated Yoga has sometimes led to unfortunate consequences so far as the mind of the person is concerned.

Jawaharlal Nehru
(The Discovery of India)

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha

(Bangalore Rationalist Association)

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha conducts monthly lectures and discussions on various topics. Those who are interested in attending the programmes conducted by the association may contact:

Dr. M.N.Keshava Rao (Phone: 26690269. Email: keshava_rao@hotmail.com)

A.S.Nataraj (Phone: 26696553. Email: rajsri@bgl.vsnl.net.in)

BVV Subba Rao (Phone: 09886679088)

Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan

Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay.

The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."

- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.

- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.

- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.

- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.

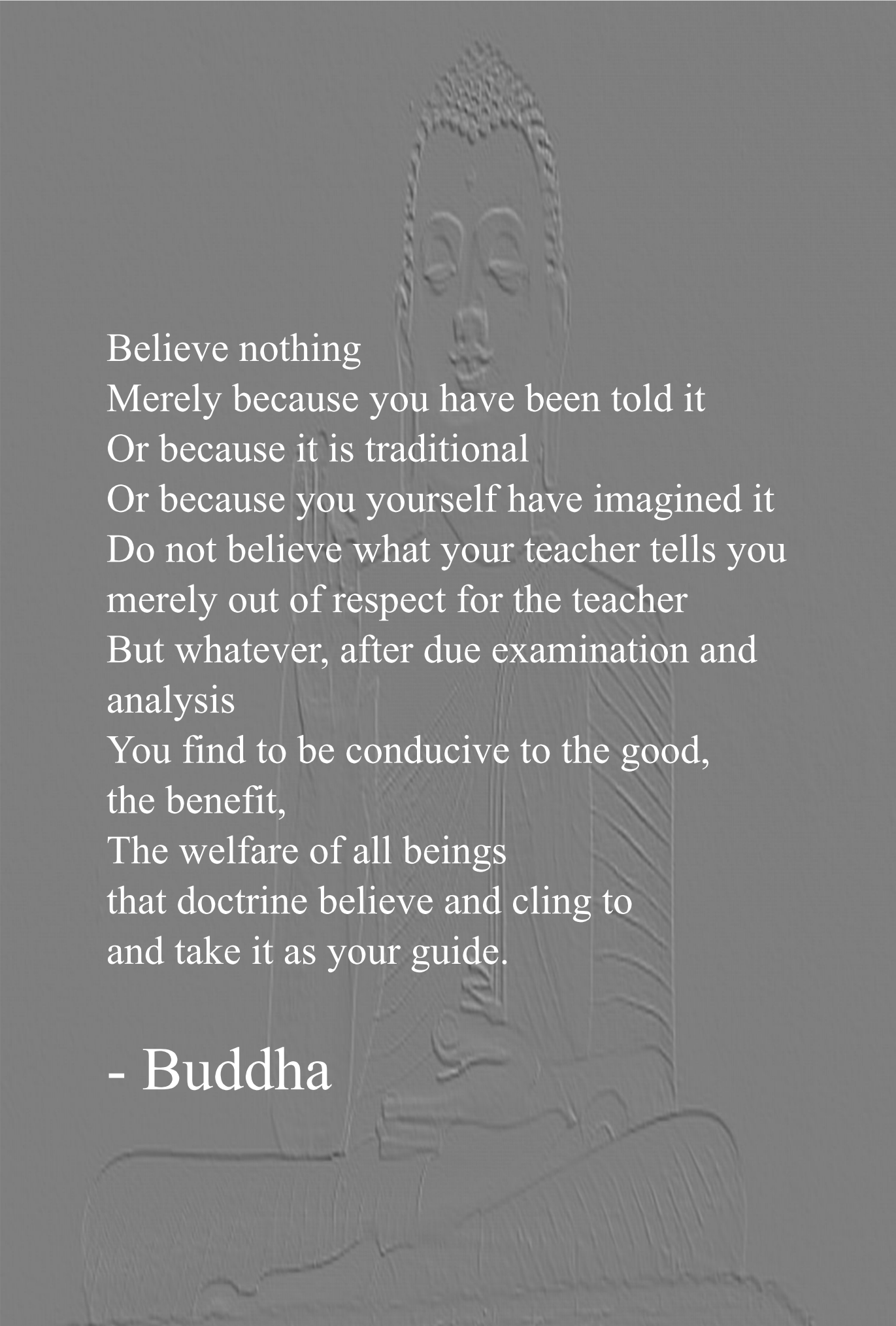


- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.

- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise) —not just most of them.

- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.

- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.



Believe nothing
Merely because you have been told it
Or because it is traditional
Or because you yourself have imagined it
Do not believe what your teacher tells you
merely out of respect for the teacher
But whatever, after due examination and
analysis
You find to be conducive to the good,
the benefit,
The welfare of all beings
that doctrine believe and cling to
and take it as your guide.

- Buddha